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ABSTRACT

Volunteers can make significant contributions in service to children and youth both by working on behalf of education and by augmenting the learning that schools provide. The merger of the National School Volunteer Program and the National Symposium on Partnerships in Education to form the National Association of Partners in Education is seen as an important development for voluntary activity and advocacy for youth. This presentation addresses four major points. First, the gap between adults and young people, due in part to changes in family structure and the inability of schools to cope with complex problems, calls for increased intervention and initiatives by volunteers. Second, mentoring programs can position volunteers to assist the educational enterprise by providing tutorial, social, and personal support; the role of caring adults is seen as increasingly important in the lives of young people. Third, fundamental principles underlying volunteer work with schools and young people include the notions of responsibility to the community and "interconnectedness," and voluntarism should promote commitment to helping others, as well as academic success, as integral to growth to maturity. Fourth, voluntarism in the schools must be expanded to other aspects of the lives of children and youth through links to the family and community. (AF)

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VOLUNTARY SERVICES FOR YOUNG AMERICANS

Remarks by Harold Howe II
to the National Association of Partners in Education
(Baltimore, MD) March 21, 1989

Before sharing some thoughts about voluntary initiatives to serve children and youth, I'd like to salute those assembled here for the strategic alliance they have recently fashioned. I understand that two major organizations sponsoring voluntary activity on behalf of education have come together to forge the National Association of Partners in Education. The National School Volunteer Program has for many years encouraged volunteers in local areas to augment the learning schools provide. The National Symposium on Partnerships in Education was formed as an agency to assist businesses and those who lead and work in them to become allies of schools. In my view, this new alliance brings to young Americans a capacity to serve their needs that is potentially greater than the separate impact of the two organizations. Acting together, their capacity to identify problems and issues that need attention is enhanced. The resources for dealing with those problems are increased - both in communities and on the national scene - and leverage for changes in institutions and public policy to encourage voluntary activity becomes stronger. My congratulations on a merger of greater promise. I can't resist adding to this a comment from a friend of mine long associated with voluntary initiatives for schools - Whitty Cuninggim, formerly of St. Louis, and now living in Winston-Salem, NC. She recently wrote me as follows:

> The new merger ... may give knowledgeable lay people a stronger voice in policy ... Now if the economic emphasis from business can be merged with that from volunteers on the whole child and education for democracy, we may avoid some of the inevitable backlash when the schools don't improve quickly. The essential ingredients for the success of this new organization are patience and persistence. There are "no easy victories" in making the changes our schools need, but without significant voluntary effort to augment what professionals do, there may be no victories at all.

I would say that this statement by Whitty Cuninggim is an important challenge for the future of your new organization.

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In the remainder of my time with you, I want to argue the following four points:

1. We face a growing and serious problem in American society: a gap between adults and young people - a void that can never be filled by professional services alone, and one that cries out for increased initiatives from volunteers.
2. Research-based analysis of the nature and positive effects of contacts between adults and young people has become increasingly available, and offers useful guidelines to your organization and others working on behalf of youth.
3. A major purpose of those who work on a voluntary basis with schools and with young people should be to inculcate in both institutions and individuals the idea that growth to maturity involves more than academic success - it includes the development of a commitment to help others.
4. The major contribution that voluntarism is making in the schools must be expanded to other aspects of the lives of children and youth, particularly in the community and family.

I. The Gap Between Adults and Young People

If our youth are to achieve maturity and become the citizens of the future they want and we need them to be, they will require regular and reassuring associations with their parents and other adults. These associations will produce the maturity we hope for only if they bring adults and young people together in relaxed circumstances to pursue common interests. Cooperative engagements with adults help young people experience the respect of others that forms the basis for self-esteem. They need to feel that adults have confidence in them, that adults believe that what they are doing in school or at work or in their varied patterns of play and recreation is both worth doing and done well. Even more than this need for recognition, young people need more chances than they get to participate in adult affairs.

But increasingly helter-skelter lives of both adults and youth militate against common experiences that build self-esteem in the young. Some of this loss of constructive association comes from changes in the family. More and more

families have both parents working as an economic necessity. For these families, time with children is harder to find. There has also been rapid growth in single-parent families over the last twenty years. In such families, it is hard to maintain adequate adult attention to children. It is particularly hard for families struggling with the effects of poverty; and a relatively high proportion of single-parent families are in that situation.

Studies show that time spent by teenagers with their parents declines as young people increasingly try to fit both school and a job into their lives; and a growing proportion of both parents spend long hours away from home meeting the demands of work and commuting. But polls conducted among teenagers show that they want more contact with their parents and that the way they would prefer to use that time is "just talking." Ironically, a large segment of the time young people and parents have together is stolen by television and leaves them without communication.

A noted sociologist, James Coleman of the University of Chicago, looking at these developments argues that our families no longer adequately provide what he calls "social capital," an element he defines as "the social networks and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up."

Evidence of this kind suggests to me that we must emphasize two different and equally important strategies for the future. The first is to build into our schools and other institutions that deal with young people a quality of caring, a friendly climate that makes them feel wanted, appreciated, and valued as individuals, as well as held to high expectations. The second, and the one that relates particularly to your concerns, is the maintenance of a comprehensive arrangement in every community and neighborhood in this land to bring young people and adults together in constructive ways.

To some degree schools provide for this second strategy, but they don't do enough. In general, because enrollments are smaller and the typical student has fewer teachers, elementary schools are more successful than secondary schools in providing an environment where kids feel wanted, appreciated, and respected. But

under the onus of new requirements masquerading as school reform, both elementary and secondary schools can become impersonal teaching factories that care more about test scores than kids. The results are self-defeating apathetic students, frustrated teachers, and a system of education that produces drop-outs in the name of higher standards.

Volunteers who want to be effective in schools and in service to children and youth must sense these contradictions found in schools, and they must understand the pressures of time that exist in families. Then and only then will they come to appreciate that, in dealing with children and youth in whatever role they may choose or be assigned, they have a dual task. One aspect of it is to help kids to learn what the schools want them to learn. The other aspect, perhaps even more important, is to become a significant adult in the lives of the young people whom they encounter.

II. What We Know About Mentors

Against this background I now want to raise the subject of mentoring, a topic that has achieved bandwagon status as more and more school districts, youth agencies, and even governors, mayors and business leaders have learned the story of Eugene Lang and the success his attention produced among a group of sixth-graders thought to be headed for a high level of failure.

You will recall that Mentor was a "wise and faithful friend" who was asked by Odysseus to watch over his son, Telemachus, while the father was away on his travels. This derivation of the word gives us its meaning - a caring adult. I want to argue that in today's circumstances this role is becoming increasingly important in the lives of young people, and that organizations like yours should be giving it special attention. I am not arguing that all volunteers serving the young in schools or in other settings must become mentors. But a very large proportion of them should. And those who are not should give some thought to taking on responsibilities that will allow teachers and other professionals to have more time for the kinds of association with young people that will enhance individual attention to students.

Dealing with youth as individuals who are living their lives here and now, rather than as people preparing for life whose heads must be stuffed with learning without regard to social and emotional maturity, is difficult, even for versatile, experienced teachers. They meet 150 different students each day for 45 minutes. Little wonder that high schools with 3,000 students tend to become impersonal places that many kids get lost in. The use of volunteer adults in such schools to help them become friendly places is probably more important than the subject matter learning purveyed by both teachers and volunteers.

The role of mentors for both teenagers and younger children is growing rapidly across the country. College students are volunteering in large numbers; numerous experiments enlist senior citizens as mentors, some of them funded by a small federal program; businesses are making arrangements to encourage their employees to link up with young people; and all kinds of other institutions are doing likewise. There is no single definition of a mentor. Sometimes they are just friends; sometimes they engage in tutoring as well; they may or may not build a relationship with a youngster's family. Some mentors, often senior citizens, are paid for their participation. Most are not.

There are problems as well as successes. Mentors can fail to develop a bond with a young person. They may be unaware of and unready for the realities they are asked to confront. They are puzzled about their roles - should they report illegal or anti-social behavior? Mentors just plain wear out. Frequently, either they or their partners in the relationship just quit - a new form of dropping out. Probably many of them need more preparation than they get.

It seems to me that your organization is ideally positioned to bring more understanding and clarity into this important arena of voluntarism. At the same time I want to recognize the difficulty of the task. Volunteers themselves and businesses that support their activities depend on a positive public image to maintain their endeavor. To launch evaluations of them is enough to cool the enthusiasm of donors; to suggest in evaluations that changes are needed to produce results, can turn off both financial supporters and the people who have worked hard without compensation. These are problems that your organization can help to

resolve.

In the meantime, there are beginning to be some interesting analyses of mentoring activities. Public/Private Ventures in Philadelphia,(1) a non-profit agency that evaluates social and educational experiments, has done a study of three separate mentoring programs that use senior citizens as mentors for at-risk youth. Let me quote some sentences from a recent report of theirs:

> ... Relationships divided into two types ... attachments approximating kinship, great intimacy and a willingness on the part of the elders to take on the youth's full range of problems and emotion ... /and/relationships /in which/ elders served as helpful, friendly neighbors ... but maintaining more emotional distance .. The most effective elders were individuals who had not lived what would be commonly considered "successful" lives. Many had endured strained family relationships, struggled at low-paying jobs, and battled personal problems such as alcohol abuse. Partly as the result of surviving such difficulties, these elders seemed to understand the youth, were able to communicate with them from their own experience, and established strong constructive bonds ... The programs reinforced their natural advantages by casting the elders in nonprofessional roles, giving them training and the freedom to do their work ... with the young people so that it was <u>personal, sustained</u> and <u>consistent</u> /emphasis mine/. Merely adding occasional adult contact to a conventional youth program will not produce the ties and benefits portrayed in the case studies that form the heart of this report.(2)

There are some important lessons in these few sentences. Another source for establishing an agenda on mentoring issues will be found in a recent report from the William T. Grant Foundation, Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship.(3) Ms. Tia Melaville of the Commission staff did most of the work of pulling together Appendix A of that study on the subject of mentoring. Both its substance and its accompanying references are useful.

III. Community Service for Children and Youth

The essence of citizenship is caring about and doing something for other people. As young people mature, their circle of relationships with others grows steadily. In the early years it is at home. It soon reaches to the classroom and then to the whole school. In elementary school, children become more aware of their neighborhood and of their town or city. In secondary school, their awareness grows apace. With maturity, they will learn to see themselves as citizens of both their country and the world. Every adult who associates with kids either advances this process of growing responsibility or fails to do so. Some adults think children

should be taught negative attitudes toward certain people. Remember the ironic song in the musical, South Pacific:

> You've got to be taught to be afraid
> Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
> And people whose skin is a different shade.
> You've got be carefully taught.
>
> You've got to be taught before it's too late,
> Before you are six or seven or eight,
> To hate all the people your relatives hate.
> You've got to be carefully taught.

Volunteers who work with young people need to consider what their influence will be in the socialization process of which they become a part. They will be hard-pressed to avoid having some effect on the attitudes of young people they are trying to help. But whether that effect is positive, negative or neutral will depend on the volunteer.

Our country is going through a self-examination these days in regard to this realm of caring for others. President George Bush has identified "a thousand points of light," each of which is a beacon of evidence that indeed we do care; and he urges us to expand that element of our national life. Others looking at America today see signals that suggest individualism has run rampant in our society, that the "me generation" is guilty of saying "the heck with the other guy," and that competition has been so flaunted as a virtue that the instinct to join in the common good has eroded.

Robert Bellah in his recent book, Habits of the Heart, says the following:

> Generosity of spirit is thus the ability to acknowledge an interconnectedness -one's debt to society - that binds one to others whether one wants to accept it or not. It is also the ability to engage in the caring that nurtures that interconnectedness. It is a virtue that everyone should strive for ... a conception of citizenship that is still alive in America.(4)

Your new organization is in the front ranks of the country's effort to expand the "interconnectedness" among Americans. Who more than volunteers working with youth has the opportunity to forge the links that will strengthen the bonds among our future citizens? What a powerful example business leadership can provide as it adopts the broad purpose of making more youngsters more successful in school! What a contrast it is to see business leaders committed to the education of blacks and Hispanics, when a few short years ago business maintained a hands-off stance

in our civil rights movement!

How should you go about this task? My first suggestion is that you latch onto the already expanding movement to enlist young people in community service activities. This movement is expressed in several ways, the first of which is particularly congenial to your mode of operation as volunteers in schools. In numerous places, schools are beginning to offer to youth the opportunity for community service, sometimes as an option and sometimes as a graduation requirement. The planning and operation of these community service activities for the young constitute a relatively new and extremely important area of work for volunteers. Business leaders can help to locate sites where youth and adults work together to accomplish tasks of value to the community. In hospitals, in public parks, in schools themselves, in homes for the aging, in churches, in carrying out public ceremonies, and even in the operation of local governemnt and youth service agencies, places can be found where voluntary work by young people can be joined with that of adults to meet local needs.

Another strategy draws on the example of the dozens of so-called "youth corps," that already exist around the U.S.A. There are state-wide youth corps like the California Conservation Corps; there are city-based youth corps. Some of these have already been evaluated and there are lessons to be learned from the findings.(5) Your organization can join with others now working in this realm to influence the formation of new youth corps activities. You may find welcome assistance in this endeavor from federal sources. Before he was elected, President Bush committed himself to the support of such activities.

There is a full chapter in The Forgotten Half entitled "Citizenship Through Service." I commend it to you as a useful summary of what is known about this subject.

IV. Linking Voluntarism to the Family and Community

Still another avenue for the significant involvement of voluntary initiatives is found in a relatively new pattern that uses the resources of both schools and the community to strengthen families and to help them support the purposes of schools.

The value of close connections between parents and schools is already well established. But the strategies for building those connections are not simple. On the one hand, over-emphasis on professionalism by teachers can deter parent involvement in schools; and on the other, parents can interpret efforts to improve their own performance as their children's "first teachers" as an unwarranted intrusion on privacy.

But a recent article by Sharon Kagan of the Bush Center for Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University explains the great potential of local community efforts "to impart knowledge to parents" so that they will be both strengthened in their parental functions and enlisted in support of schooling.(6) Although the relationships involved in such endeavors are clearly sensitive, I believe that they offer a significant opportunity for new roles for volunteers as well as for the redefinition of certain professional roles. The main point here is the strengthening of the parents' leverage in the lives of their children, a leverage that has, as we have seen, suffered from the competition for time between jobs and family. But it has suffered also from child-bearing by children who don't know how to be parents. Our youngest parents need special help to learn how to care for themselves and their children, and there are surely places for volunteers in helping to develop that learning. I might add that Chapter Two of The Forgotten Half provides a broad overview of the situation of young families in the U.S.A. Although it does not delve into the role of volunteers in this realm, it offers a perspective that cries out for their involvement.

Linking voluntarism to the community is about as important as relating it to families. In a way, this subject requires a whole additional speech. To avoid that, I shall simply refer you to Chapter Three of The Forgotten Half, entitled "Toward More Responsive Communities." A major sub-heading in that chapter discusses "Shifting Volunteer Resources" and the national decline in volunteer participation in recent years. The study espouses both increasing volunteer work with youth and the recognition that youth work in communities requires new professional roles and preparation for them.

V. Conclusion

I want to close these remarks with two observations: one about the way we adults think about young Americans, the other about the importance of building an agenda for our work with the young that emphasizes prevention as a strategy rather than cures.

We tend to think of youth as problems rather than as assets with talents that can be used right now and potential that can ensure both their future and our own. As long as our image of youth is predominately negative and emphasizes drugs, dropouts, irresponsible sex, and delinquency as their main characteristics, we are just plain wrong and unlikely to be successful in reducing the problems some of our young people have. We must both trust our youth and make better use of their talents. They are eager to participate in and contribute to the adult world as literally hundreds, if not thousands of examples of youth-initiated efforts to improve their communities in cities, towns and rural areas across the country will attest. Yet if you ask them what they think adults think of them, they say, "They think we're a bunch of bums." There is an immense amount that all of us can do to prevent this from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In raising the subject of prevention versus cure, let me share with you a statement that is quoted from The Forgotten Half:

> There was an ancient Cornish custom used to test whether a person was insane. The individual was confronted with three elements: a spigot, a bucket, and a ladle. As water flowed from the spigot into the bucket, he was instructed to keep the water from overflowing. No matter how tenaciously he ladled water from the bucket - keeping it from overflowing - he was judged insane if he failed to turn off the spigot.
>
> By that ancient standard we behave in a crazy way, picking up the pieces of damaged children - at greater and greater cost to society with more and more dire consequences - rather than curb the supply. What is it ... that causes us to treat the consequences of damage far more vigorously than the undertakings to prevent it?

We have an immense amount of activity in our country to repair the damage done to our young by poverty, adult neglect, schools that don't meet their needs and a variety of other circumstances that influence their lives. I am not implying that these efforts should be abandoned. They are needed and necessary but not sufficient. What is needed even more is attention to the young before they get into

trouble so that fewer of them will do so. And that is where your work should be focussed.

I hope you have noticed that these remarks of mine carry a single, central theme - that the education of children and youth is a much wider and deeper enterprise than schooling. Much of a child's education occurs at home; a significant portion of it grows from community associations, including those encountered in church. These institutions can be joined in common purposes with the schools, or all three can be out of communication with each other. More than anything else, I urge you to think in terms of a close triangular alliance of home, school and community as you fashion future strategies.